

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 169 690

EC 114 087

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TITLE PROJECT HOPE: A Model for Developing Innovative Work
Evaluation/Experience Programs for Severely Disabled
Secondary School Students.
PUB DATE Aug 76
NOTE 13p.
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Deaf; Educational Resources;
*Job Placement; Legal Problems; Parent Participation;
Senior High Schools; *Severely Handicapped;
*Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS *Project Hope

ABSTRACT

The report discusses Project Hope, a program to prepare deaf high school students to enter into employment after graduation. The program, which can be adapted for use with many other types of severely handicapped high school students, offers some low-cost solutions to problems such as limited rehabilitation facility resources, legal restrictions, low academic achievement levels, role confusion, financial limitations, and limited school resources. Other aspects discussed include communication systems, parental involvement, and assessment. (DLS)

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PROJECT HOPE
A Model for Developing
Innovative Work Evaluation/Experience
Programs for Severely Disabled Secondary School Students

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Developing programs to enable severely handicapped high school students to enter into employment after graduation requires consideration of many factors. In this article, we discuss some possible solutions to the problems encountered in attempting to assist the students to obtain such employment. These problem areas include: limited facility resources, limited school resources, muddled communication systems, legal restrictions, low academic achievement levels, parental involvement, transportation, role confusion, financial restrictions, confidentiality and assessment. Difficult problems, but they are not hopeless problems.

We would like to suggest some solutions, by discussing our experiences with the graduating class, ages 16 through 21 of a special education school for the deaf. We feel that the solutions developed by this program may be beneficial to the professional community by providing an innovative model for developing programs to serve the severely disabled without the use of grant monies. Besides a historical account of the process, suggestions for improvements are also made. While our program was with the deaf, others severely handicapped face similar problems.

Considering the many problems, including the lack of facilities, as well as the lack of funding, several counselors in the California State Department of Rehabilitation (DR) met with the Los Angeles City Board of Education and Goodwill Industries of Southern California to attempt to develop solutions. First of all, it was found that the students attending the school for the deaf were serviced by six different DR district offices, adding an additional dimension of coordination. A committee of the DR counselors, representatives from the Board of Education, Goodwill and the school for the deaf was formed.

The committee identified fifteen students in the graduating class, that appeared to be able to benefit from a work experience program, as well as an assessment of their abilities, aptitudes and temperments. The DR counselors met with the parents and students to explain what the program hoped to do for their children. The facility agreed to hire deaf interpreters on an hourly basis out of the fees received. The school psychologists met with the Goodwill psychologist to examine the proposed testing. The groundwork was laid.

PROBLEMS

Many communities are limited in the number of sheltered workshops that provide assessment for the deaf. The reasons given are legion: lack of trained staff in sign language, lack of special funds to cover such programs, lack of assessment tools designed for the deaf, etc. While these are all legitimate problems it is possible to modify existing methods, if the facility is willing.

The Department of Rehabilitation faces the very real problem of dwindling funds and expanding demands for results with an increasingly difficult caseload. Grant funds to begin innovative research and design programs are limited. While awaiting the outcome and application of this research, existing clients may not be served adequately.

Special education schools also are caught in funding crunches. Although usually receiving a higher funding rate than regular schools, the expertise to deliver skills to the deaf which result in an education comparable to that received by the non-handicapped, given the same motivation and intelligence, is limited. There are controversies still raging over teaching techniques, lack of agreement on the

signs themselves, limited numbers of teachers both trained to teach in total communication and knowledgeable in the variety of subjects taught from kindergarten through high school.

The committee found that students frequently have difficulty expressing their vocational interests not only because of their low level skills in communication but, like most youth, they lack an exposure to the world of work. Our current protective laws against child labor, coupled with the increasing minimum wage requirements, have in effect closed the doors of employment to many youths. Moreover, just when the student desires to leave home and establish independent living, it becomes apparent that these skills are lacking.

ASSESSMENT

Through negotiations, it was determined that the facility could modify its existing work sample evaluation program to serve the deaf by contracting with interpreters for the time that the students would be there. This cost was paid by the facility out of the fees received. Together with the work sample evaluators, the interpreters developed

new techniques for testing and modified existing standardized tests for the deaf. The main problem was the low level communication skills of the clients, mostly at the second grade level.

TRANSPORTATION

The school agreed to begin training the designated students how to use public transportation prior to the onset of the program. One suggestion for the district, was to bus the students to the workshop during hours that were of low bus utilization rather than at peak hours. It was only possible to bus the students back to the school, therefore requiring them to go to the workshop on public transportation. Our main problem was one of distance, some students traveled over 40 miles to the workshop or the school. These few required school busing.

SCHOOL

In order to provide other needed instruction it was decided the student would attend the workshop only two hours a day. This made it possible for the school to tie in a workshop experience with other classroom work. Possibly additional teacher aids could be utilized to enrich the vocational explorations the students experience at the facility.

If there are budgetary restrictions to adding or obtaining vocational equipment it may be possible for the students to receive this training through Adult Education Classes. As the school already had the student's records, they agreed to abstract necessary information for DR. In those cases where the records did not meet the Department's requirements, additional medical or psychological examinations were obtained at DR expense. The school sent a teacher each day on the school bus to assist in sign language communications and provide liason with counselors over student problems observed at the work station.

LEGAL

There may be legal considerations in the student not using school transportation, but in our program this did not seem to be an obstacle. It is possible that the school may experience difficulty collecting Average Daily Attendance (ADA) monies if the student does not first report to the school before going to the workshop. Also, there is a possibility of some liability for the school while the student is in transit to the school on public transportation.

FACILITY

Goodwill enrolled one of its counselors in a sign language class at a community college to increase the ability to communicate with the students. The interpreters were able to handle any communication problems that came up during assessment. Weekly group discussions were held by the DR counselors with the students centering on the students' experiences and attitudes toward skills they needed to obtain employment. The goals were to help them mature in their attitudes toward work and increase their communication skills as they relate to working.

Before the program began a DR counselor held an in-service training meeting with the floor supervisors to sensitize them to the special needs of the deaf and also to train them in methods of dealing with deaf clients. During the program the floor supervisors contacted the DR counselors and the school teacher of specific issues as they arose, which further deepened the facility staff's understanding of the deaf. At the end of the first semester the facility organized, at no cost to the staff, a sign language class during working hours on the premises to expand signing ability.

The committee attempted to aid the floor supervisors in seeing themselves as instructors, not foremen, to assist the students in experiencing real work and to help them to mature in their attitudes and skills in relating to co-workers and supervisors.

Midway through the semester, the parents were invited to tour the facility and discuss their child's progress over punch and cookies. As one parent put it, "My daughter gets up eager to go to the workshop. Before, if she had an excuse, she seemed to avoid school by staying at home. Now she says they depend on her at work and she goes every day." For the most part, the students were highly motivated to work, much more so than the usual DR referral to the workshop.

It was felt that the work sample environment was seen by the students as similar to school and yet as a new experience, so they performed each task rapidly. On work stations they were paid according to their productivity, most earning money for the first time in their lives. This proved to be a great incentive.

Because Goodwill is not a contract workshop there were a variety of different work experiences and never a lack of work. In a contract workshop, students that are only there two hours a day could present real problems in scheduling. However, perhaps long term contracts could be obtained and a certain portion of the work normally done by employees could be set aside for the students. This would not interfere with normal operations and because of the additional workers available might result in the job being finished ahead of schedule. One further possibility would be for the facility to act as a job bank for the community, supplying temporary labor to competitive industry. This has been called by some "workshop without walls". The limitation to this is that most students are untrained in job skills and additional staff would have to be initially assigned to each student to teach them the task. This may require funding.

RESULTS

The program started with fifteen students. Two were hired by Goodwill, two obtained full-time competitive

employment through the efforts of their DR counselors, eight went on to additional schooling, one dropped out, one moved to the East Coast, and contact was lost with one. Besides developing appropriate work behavior and gaining employment, there were unquantifiable results for the students in terms of increased awareness, maturity and positive self-image.

In concluding, let us be frank. It is not an easy program to initiate and is difficult to keep running, but the results are positive. An ingredient that made this program work was cooperation between the school, DR, Goodwill, and the students and their parents. It took at least three months lead time to meet with the clients and parents to obtain necessary information for a complete intake, and to arrange for medical and psychological evaluations when required. Setting time limits on each phase of the pre-planning helped to get the job done. Individual staffings as well as group discussion with the students cleared up problems as they arose. Conferences with the accompanying teacher made the faculty aware of the student's behavior and helped them to continue working towards developing appropriate behavior. Modifying assessment tools to fit the deaf assisted in making meaningful recommendations for occupational choices for the students.

Continued efforts on a local scale are necessary if the severely disabled are to receive appropriate services that will assist them in entering into eventual competitive employment. There is hope for the severely disabled, but we must make it happen.

PROJECT HOPE

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